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Babel, Jerusalem and Kumba:

Missiological reflections on genesis 11: 1-9 and Acts 2: 1-13¹

1. Introduction

The assessment of the role of the missionaries in the process of the coming of Christianity to Africa is a recurring theme in African Theology. At the inception of African Theology scholars tended to be angry at and critical of the Western missionary enterprise, mainly because of its negative attitude towards African religion and traditions. They stated that mission was the surrogate of Western colonialism (colonialism at prayer) and accused the missionaries of collaboration in destroying indigenous cultures. Other scholars have been more moderate in their judgement of Western missionaries, insisting that African Christians should be grateful for the great courage of these people in bringing the gospel to Africa. Such voices tend to show more understanding towards the shortsightedness of the missionaries, as their attitude reflected centuries of European ethnocentrism and not merely their private opinions.

In his book *Translating the Message*, the Gambian scholar Lamin Sanneh takes a somewhat ambiguous position in this discussion. On the one hand, Sanneh develops a theory on mission which might give sufficient ammunition for criticizing the Western missionary enterprise. On the other hand, however, he actually uses his theory to praise the efforts of the missionaries, saying that their translation work, quite contrary to popular opinion, has been of great support to indigenous cultures.

According to Sanneh we can identify among the missionary religions two basic paradigms of mission. He calls them “mission by diffusion” and “mission by translation”.² The first paradigm, “mission by diffusion”, makes the missionary culture the inseparable carrier of the message. This implies that the message, which is carried to other peoples and cultures, cannot be extracted from the culture of the carrier, the missionary. Indigenous languages and traditions are in an anomalous position as they are profane over against the religious language and culture of the missionary, which are to be implanted in the receiving

¹ This article was first published in the *International Review of Mission*, No.366 (July 2003), 406-421.

² L. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989), 29.

society. According to Sannah, this is unquestionably the stronger strand in Islam. To say it sharply, the holy Qur'an cannot be translated and thus Islamization becomes, in the end, Arabization.³ The second paradigm, "mission by translation", is characterized by making the recipient culture the true and final locus of the proclamation. In this paradigm the message needs to be translated into the language and cultural context of those who receive the message. Consequently, there is no holy language nor a God-chosen cultural tradition to be implanted in other cultures. The recipient culture is destigmatized while the culture of the message-bearer is relativized.⁴ According to Sannah, this principle of translatability is the vintage mark of Christianity.⁵

In order to articulate this point, Sannah draws a vivid portrait of the apostle Paul working on the Jewish-Gentile frontier.⁶ However, he does not give much exegetical or biblical theological material in order to support his thesis. I was especially surprised to notice that he hardly refers to two very central passages from Scripture which deal specifically with issues of language and translation. These two passages, i.e. the passage of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11: 1-9) and the passage of Pentecost in Jerusalem (Acts 2: 1-13), cannot be ignored in this discussion because they deal so explicitly with the diversity of languages in this world and secondly because they are widely used in the history of Christian interpretation. In this article I intend, firstly, to give exegetical and missiological reflections on these two passages, trying to demonstrate how these texts support the thesis of "mission as translation". Secondly, there is a long tradition of Christian interpretation, from St. Augustine to Karl Barth, combining these two passages of Babel and Jerusalem and placing them over against each other. Simplified the line of reasoning is thus: in Babel things went wrong with the languages, but during Pentecost the diversity has been overcome resulting in Christian unity. In this article I want to challenge this general Christian interpretation and establish a new balance between Genesis 11: 1-9 and Acts 2: 1-13. And finally, I wish to use the content of this article on "mission as translation" not merely to evaluate the missionary enterprise of the

³ Ibid., 213.

⁴ Ibid., 9.

⁵ See also L. Sannah, "Translatability in Islam & Christianity in Africa: A Thematic Approach" in T.D. Blakely, W.E.A. van Beek & D.L. Thomson (eds.), *Religion in Africa: Experience and Expression* (London: James Currey, 1994), 23-45.

⁶ Sannah, *Translating the Message*. Chapter 1, "The Birth of Mission: The Jewish-Gentile Frontier", 9-49.

past, but to evaluate its implications for the missionary thinking in the African historical churches today. For this I will use the example of the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon at whose theological seminary, in Kumba, I am presently teaching as an ecumenical co-worker. As such, I will move in this article from Babel to Jerusalem and then on to Kumba.

2. Babel

In the Christian history of interpretation there appears to be a general consensus as to the basic theological meaning of Genesis 11:1-9. Over the centuries this text has been explained as an etiology for the diversity of peoples and languages. This diversity is the result of divine punishment as a response to human pride. In practically all commentaries the central categories of interpretation are pride, hubris and punishment. Allan Ross writes: “Since this decision (the attempt to unite and live in one place) was open rebellion against God’s original commission, their sin as well may be labelled hubris, that is, immense pride that leads to disobedience to God.”⁷ Gerhard von Rad states that primeval history (Genesis 1-11) concludes with the fruitless climax of divine punishment for sinful rebellion.⁸ Even in his very complete and sophisticated commentary, Claus Westermann is not able to transcend these categories, though he is talking more of God’s intervention than of punishment. For him, God’s punitive intervention is against human presumption, against the overstepping of the human limits and is aimed at throwing them back within the limits of their state as creatures.⁹

The implications of such interpretations are both evident and, I believe, disastrous. For the diversity of languages and nations is then the result of God’s punishment of humanity. Ross concludes indeed correctly that “the present number of languages that form national barriers is a monument to sin.”¹⁰ Von Rad has to wonder whether God has rejected the nations in wrath forever.¹¹ Westermann attempts not to evaluate the human dispersion and confusion

⁷ A. P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Bookhouse, 1988), 233.

⁸ G. von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, rev. ed. (London: SCM Press, 1972), 152.

⁹ C. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 551; 555.

¹⁰ Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 234.

¹¹ Von Rad, *Genesis*, 153.

of languages merely as punishment, but to understand God's intervention as a guard against a danger that grows with its unity.¹² In this line of thought, the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa could develop ideas about the separate development of different ethnic groups and races. During the heyday of Apartheid in South Africa, the general synod of this church published a document on "Race, people, nation and race-relationships in the perspective of Scripture".¹³ This document asserts, in a very subtle theological discourse, that ethnic and racial diversity have been ordained by God in Babel. It would therefore be wrong to force people of different languages and ethnicity into unity. On the contrary, it is better, both in church and nation, to have a differentiated development in which the particular linguistic and ethnic identities may be cherished and may mature. Those who deny the racial diversity and strive for mixed and human-made unity range themselves on the side of the tower-builders of Babel and against the divine punishment meant for the present dispensation. With reference to Genesis 11: 1-9 and its history of interpretation, the theologians writing this document were amply able to legitimate the existence of Apartheid (segregation) in South Africa.

Two critiques

There are, in my opinion, two main critiques to be made against this framework of interpretation. Firstly, the purely negative understanding of the dispersion (as punishment) does not fit the theological unfolding of primeval history. The dispersion had already started right after the flood, with the sons of Noah filling the earth. Both in Genesis 9 and 10 the dispersion is positively acknowledged. It sounds strange that now, in Genesis 11, the dispersion is seen in a purely negative perspective. A second and more fundamental critique is related to the non-contextual approach to the text. I quite agree with J. Severino Croatto that "we have to recover the original meaning of this passage within its own context of production, which is none other than that of the Judeans in exile".¹⁴ The traditional framework does, true enough, relate the text to the creation, flood and language diversity-mythologies of the

¹² Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 556.

¹³ *Ras, volk en natie en volkerenverhoudingen in het licht van de Schrift* (Kaapstad-Pretoria: Die Verenigde Protestantse Uitgevers, 1974).

¹⁴ J. Severino Croatto, "A Reading of the Story of the Tower of Babel from the Perspective of Non-Identity: Genesis 11: 1-9 in the Context of Its Production" in F. F. Segovia and M. A. Tolbert (eds.) *Teaching the Bible: The Discourse and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998), 204.

Babylonian and neighbouring nations. But they do not situate the origin of the text in the experiences of suffering and of political and religious oppression of the Jewish exiles. The problem is that the text is treated from the angle of general human query and is not taking into account the issues related to political power and powerlessness. When situating it in the context of production, i.e. the Babylonian exile, we will be able to read this text as a Jewish response to the experiences of political and cultural oppression.

We certainly need to acknowledge the importance of human pride as very central in this passage. However, it would be incomplete not to identify the other human emotion present in this passage. Besides *pride* (let us make ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves), we should identify *fear* as the main emotion of the second part of this same vers 4 (lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the earth). These people are afraid of being scattered, afraid of losing the unity. But this fear of being scattered should not only be understood geographically, but certainly also ideologically. They want to build a city with a tower reaching into the heavens. This religious connection, into the heavens, is related to the religious legitimization of the political system. This high tower symbolises the divine connection between heaven and the king, as representative of the system. In the ancient religious world, the king often was indeed perceived as divine. This implies that this city with its tower must be understood as a response to the fear of being scattered, the fear of losing control. We must not make the mistake of thinking that all are equally afraid of being scattered. That would be a rather naive and a-political reading of human reality and of this text. We are dealing here with economy and politics in which some people are in control while others are at the mercy of the system. The building of such a project in the ancient world was usually done by slaves and other disadvantaged people(s). As such, we must read the emotion of fear behind the emotion of pride. Both in psychology and political life, we know that presumption, the compulsion of having a name and the drive for megalomania are responses to human fear of losing control and domination.

It is quite interesting that our passage begins with situating the story in Shinar. This is Babylon in the Hebrew Bible, and often mentioned in relationship to the Jewish experiences of exile (Is.11:11 and Dan. 1:2). The link between Daniel 1:2 and Genesis 11:2 is of importance. In the book of Daniel we find the detailed experiences of an oppressed people in Babylon, where all peoples, nations and languages (Dan. 3: 4) have to fall down and worship the gods of the empire. Refusal to obey these religious and political idols results in torture and extermination (Dan. 3). Most scholars have indeed no doubt that the narrative is based on

experiences gathered in Babylon,¹⁵ where every major city was built with a step-tower known as ziggurat.¹⁶ The term ziggurat refers to the fortified sector of the city, the acropolis, where heaven and earth came together and in which the political and religious establishment resided. As such, the tower was indeed the ideological centre of the city.¹⁷

Now we may be able to see this passage of the Tower of Babel as a Jewish commentary on Babylonian experiences, but projected back into primeval history when there was a unity of all humankind. The city with its tower into heaven symbolised the imperative unity, politically, culturally and religiously. The Jews in the diaspora unveiled this imposing system as a desperate effort of the Babylonian oppressor to combat their fear of losing hegemony.

The story continues in a hilarious way (or is it ironic?) Whereas the people of Babel put all energy and resources together *to climb* the heavens in order to acclaim divine legitimation, God *comes down* to see the city and the tower. God reflects on what the sons of men are doing and God realizes that this is only the beginning. Nothing will be impossible for them. This is not simply related to God being afraid of human achievement and great projects, but God realizes that this unity is not healthy, not just, for all involved in that society. It is a coercive unity without freedom and without human diversity. God realizes that this tower-power-unity is detrimental to human relationships, both to those sitting at the top of the tower as to those at the underside of the tower (pyramid). And that is why God's intervention is very significant. It hits the system exactly where its power lies, namely in its unity. The unity of ethnicity and language (one people with one language) and the ideological unity is undermined by the confusion of languages. A system cannot function when its (ideological) language is confused. The coming down of God and the confusion of language is not merely punishment (as in the traditional interpretation), but also a liberating act. It reminds us of Exodus 2: 8 where God says: "I have *seen* the affliction of my people ... and *have heard* their cry ... and I *know* their sufferings and I have *come down* to deliver them... God comes down to deliver those who are the victims of the system. This God comes down and scatters those on high (Is. 2: 15). Severino Croatto writes: "This plurality of languages would represent both punishment for the oppressor and blessing for the oppressed".¹⁸

¹⁵ Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 540.

¹⁶ Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 238.

¹⁷ Severino Croatto, "A Reading of the Story of the Tower of Babel", 209.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 222.

The “gate of God” – a place of confusion

Even the end of our passage gives us proof that we are dealing with an anti-myth, a parody on the political and religious system of Babel. In situations of great suffering this kind of humour is very necessary. The exiles probably made jokes about this Babel, proudly understood as “gate of God” (from the root b-b-l) to a Jewish etymology of Balal (from the root b-l-l) meaning confusion. In this way the exiles were able to survive the strain and oppression by telling each other that their oppressors might think this their city is the “gate of God”, but that in reality it is the place of chaos and confusion. To write that “this is an indication of the cultural level at which such amateurish popular etymologies occur” shows a serious lack of understanding as to the context of production of this text.¹⁹

G. Steiner, a Jewish writer and philosopher, who has devoted his life to issues of language philosophy²⁰, dedicates in his autobiography a whole chapter on the meaning of Babel. He writes about a hidden primordial significance behind the facade of this myth of Babel, which implies that the abundance of languages implied no curse or punishment but, on the contrary, a blessing without end.²¹ In my opinion this is not just the hidden significance, but the outcome of an interpretation that has shifted its perspective from a general human query (concerning human and linguistic diversity) to the perspective of an oppressed and exiled people who struggle to survive in the context of an overtowering system without cultural and religious freedom. From this perspective, the confusion of the languages is indeed a blessing without end.

The implications of this exegesis may be quite far-reaching. Most important is that this text deals not exclusively with punishment on human pride. Certainly, there is an element of this in that the building of ideological systems of unity and domination is being rejected. Certainly, those in power are punished through the confusion of language and by being scattered over the face of all the earth. But we cannot rate the diversity of languages and nations merely as the outcome of punishment. The languages are part of deliverance and

¹⁹ Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 553.

²⁰ G. Steiner, *Language and Silence; Essays 1958-1966* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967) and G. Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of language & translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

²¹ G. Steiner, *Errata: An Examined Life*, chapter 7. I have consulted the Dutch translation. G. Steiner, *Errata: Een leven in Onderzoek. Autobiografie* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1997).

blessing. A blessing from God intended to prevent the use of any language as a tool of human aggression and exploitation.²² In this myth the diversity of languages is given as a protection against domination. Diversity in language, and thus culture, is given in order that people may be free and develop themselves according to their own dreams. Babel stands for an imposed unity, without freedom of culture, language or religion. Babel stands for the human tendency of towering above others, and the internal hunger to mould others into (ideological) conformity. Babel stands for the mechanism of towers, which has no eye for what is small, minor and unspectacular.

3. Jerusalem

As noted in the former section, the (Christian) interpretation of the passage of the tower of Babel was often negative: something in human history went wrong and consequently needed a solution. We can find this approach from the Second Vatican Council right back to the church-fathers of the early church. The Second Vatican document on “missions” states that: “The union (of all peoples) was to be achieved by the Church of the New Covenant, a Church which speaks all tongues, which lovingly understands and accepts all tongues, and thus overcomes the divisiveness of Babel (at Pentecost).”²³ Karl Barth writes that the story of Pentecost “stands in such a remarkable contrast to the conclusion of the table in Genesis 10 and the story of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11”.²⁴ And St. Augustine comments on the relationship between Pentecost and Babel: “Through proud men, divided were the tongues; through humble Apostles, united were the tongues. Spirit of pride dispersed tongues; Holy Spirit united tongues”.²⁵ And in a tractate on the Gospel of St. John, he furthermore writes: “If pride caused diversities of tongues, Christ’s humility has united these diversities in one. The

²² N. Davies, *Wales: Language, Nation, Faith and Witness*, Gospel and Cultures Pamphlet 4 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1996), 19.

²³ W.M. Abbott, S.J. (gen. ed.), *The Documents of Vatican II*. (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1966), 588.

²⁴ K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics III*, 4 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), 320.

²⁵ St. Augustine, “Psalm LV” in P. Schaff (ed.) *A Select Library on the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Volume VIII, St Augustine: Exposition on the book of Psalms* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 213.

Church is now bringing together what the tower had sundered. Of one tongue there were made many... of many tongues there is made one ...".²⁶

From the perspective given in section 2, it becomes clear that these theologians give a one-sided picture of the Babel-passage, which they subsequently contrast with the meaning of Pentecost. Pentecost, to them, implies a unification of nations and languages; many tongues and diversities were made one! However, in this section we need to venture a careful interpretation of the passage of Acts 2: 1-13 with special attention to the importance of the language issue in order to compare, contrast or balance with the passage of the tower of Babel.

First of all, we need to take serious notice of the Jewish roots of the Pentecost event. They (the Apostles and believers of Acts 1:15) were all together in one place on this 50th day. Certainly, as devout Jews, they were celebrating the Jewish feast of Pentecost, which was on the 50th day after Passover. This was the name for the celebration of the Feast of Weeks, a harvest festival (Exod. 23:16; 34:22; Lev. 23:15-21; Num. 28:26; Deut. 16: 9-12). But by the first century AD., the day of Pentecost had become primarily a celebration of God's gift of the Law of Moses to Israel.²⁷ This may be important for understanding the format in which the Pentecost event is narrated by Luke. For he is using in his description characteristics of theophanies, very much related to the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai.²⁸ Central motifs in Exodus 19:16-20 are sound (thunder; trumpet) and fire (lightning; smoke; fire). Also in Acts 2 we hear of sound and fire (vs. 2-3). We may conclude from this that Luke is portraying the Pentecost event in terms related to the giving of the Law at Sinai. In other words, the religious feast of the 50th day is now interpreted in a new way, related to the coming of the Holy Spirit. Theologically this implies that Luke compares the situation of the waiting Jesus-believers with those who had just escaped Egypt. After the liberation from Egypt, from slavery and oppression, God gave the law as a guide towards the promised land. Being set free does not mean having the knowledge of how to live freely and not return to "Egyptian ways of life". In

²⁶ St. Augustine, "Tractate VI" in *Ibid., Volume VII, St. Augustine: Homilies on the Gospel of John; Homilies on the First Epistle of John; Soliloquies* (1991), 42.

²⁷ P.W. Walaskay, *Acts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 34. Among New Testament scholars there appears to be disagreement on this issue. See C. K. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles: Vol I* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 111 and B. Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press/ Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 131.

²⁸ Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles I*, 113.

the same vein, Luke portrays the disciples as receiving guidance on the way towards the Kingdom of God. Being liberated through the resurrection of Jesus does not imply having the knowledge of how to live the life of the Kingdom. The Holy Spirit takes here the function of the Law. As the Jewish people received the Law on the 50th day after their liberation from Egypt, the Jesus-followers receive the Holy Spirit on the 50th day after the resurrection of Jesus. Luke is using “Sinai-language” in order to express the miraculous events of Pentecost.

But just as we actually understand little of the Sinai-event, so we understand little of the Pentecost-event. We only learn that “tongues of fire” rested on each one of them and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues. Clearly this is different from the Sinai-event, though the law also spoke the word of God to the people. We have to face here the issue of *tongues of fire* related to *tongues of language*. The Greek word for tongue (of fire) in this passage is *glossa*, but this *glossa* is also used to denote language (in verse 4). Tongue (of language), however, is also expressed in this passage by the Greek word *dialektos*. Apparently Luke wants to link these two tongues: *glossa* and *dialektos*. This leaves many scholars in a confused state, because in the New Testament the word *glossa* is usually linked with glossolalia, the speaking in tongues, and not with foreign languages. The thing with glossolalia is that it is usually not intelligible, while the miracle of Pentecost is about intelligibility! Some scholars want to solve this problem by attempting to analyse the passage and to trace out sources or traditions, and to distinguish them from Luke’s editorial work. Usually this leads to theories about the sources Luke has used and about the confusion between them, namely that Luke confused glossolalia with the language miracle.²⁹

What does this mean?

To me it is quite astonishing to note that most scholars are focussing on facticity. They want to know the truth as to what happened and as to how the text has come into being, but they hardly ask for the theological meaning of the text. I do not deny the importance of several exegetical methods, but in the end I am not interested in speculations about Luke’s sources and theories concerning how this text was established (e.g. the list of nations). I believe that the importance of the passage of Acts 2: 1-13 must mainly be found in the theological content, not the historical accuracy. And thus we have to wonder, with those in Jerusalem who were amazed and perplexed, “what does this mean?” (vs. 12) Theologically it is

²⁹ See for a treatment of this issue: Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles I*, 109-110.

important to understand the link between the Jewish Pentecost and the new interpretation given by Luke (see above). In addition to that, we have to ask for the theological implications of the Spirit speaking in many languages, of the Holy Spirit being a polyglot.

Here we need to begin with the most obvious. In the expectation of the people there would probably be no doubt as to what language God, or the Holy Spirit, would be talking. The language of the religion of all these people was Hebrew, or better, Aramaic. Though this might have changed in diaspora-Judaism (Greek/Septuagint), Jerusalem was still the centre of faith and Hebrew/Aramaic was the religious language. The fact that those diaspora Jews dwelt in Jerusalem testifies exactly to this point. Whether they were diaspora Jews dwelling (in the sense of retiring at the end of their lives) in Jerusalem or pilgrims who gathered in Jerusalem for the feast, in both cases it testifies to Jerusalem being the religious centre of the Jewish world. Hebrew/Aramaic was an intrinsic part of that religious culture. These devout Jews were not only amazed about what had happened (vs. 12) but also about the fact that the actors were Galileans (vs. 7). For the sophisticated Jerusalemites these Galileans were peripheral people, with little education and no correct language. It was a contradiction in terms to expect anything special from Galilee (Acts 4.13; John 1.46; 7:52).

If now the Spirit had spoken Hebrew/Aramaic to all those devout Jews from every nation under heaven gathered in Jerusalem, then the whole exercise would have been easy. When you communicate, you use the most general language. When you communicate in a religious setting, you use the language generally known to the people you are addressing. Why, for heaven's sake, should these people hear the message in their Gentile languages, which are the languages of the regions they had lived or were living in and which they used for communication with the Gentiles? The question "what does this mean" is not only related to the issue concerning these men being able to speak foreign languages, but also to the question why these languages are used at all for the proclamation of the message. Why on earth would these people hear the message in their "home" languages while being present in Jerusalem during a Jewish religious festival? That is the theological question behind the Pentecost account!

The main intention of the Acts of the Apostles is to show the movement of the message from Jerusalem (Judea) and Samaria and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Very central in this movement is the Gentile breakthrough, beginning in chapter 8 with the death of Stephen, the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch and the conversion of Paul. We may say that the main conflict in the following 50 years was the issue whether Gentiles could be accepted into the movement of Jesus followers, and if so, how they should be accepted and integrated. The

whole theology of Paul (salvation by grace) may be understood against the background of the conflict between the Judaisers (Gentiles have to be circumcised; they have to become Jewish, in language, culture and religion, cf. Acts 15) and those who were of the opinion that Gentiles could follow Jesus Christ without renouncing their (cultural) identities.³⁰ Paul certainly was the champion of the Gentiles, protecting them continuously against too much pressure from the Jewish Christian party. Luke's theology in the Acts of the Apostles tries to explain that the message is moving from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth and, secondly, that the Gentiles can be Christians within their own contexts. However, here at the beginning of the church in Acts 2, he can only prefigure the coming events. The Gentile breakthrough still had to come. And so Luke could only "make use" of the diaspora-Jews (and proselytes) to represent the ends of the earth. Those who come together in Jerusalem represent not only diaspora Judaism but the Gentiles whose languages they speak. The scene is programmatic.³¹ The Pentecost event marks the beginning of the church and provides the direction of the journey!

This direction is symbolized by the Spirit speaking the languages of "every" nation under heaven. Not only are these nations going to be objects of mission, but they will hear the message in their own languages. The nations are to be included in the Jesus-movement and without discrimination. Their languages and cultures are to be fully acknowledged and their identities fully included. The Holy Spirit, at Pentecost, reveals that these languages and cultures are to become bearers of the message. They are not inferior over against one central language. This link between the Spirit and the Gentile languages is guaranteed by Luke's combination of *glossa* and *dialektos*. The new community will not be mono-centralistic according to the Pentecost-event. The community will break barriers between nations and languages but not by offering a single religious and cultural system. By definition, the Spirit has shown the direction towards plurality. The plurality of languages leads towards a plural, multicultural movement. This radical pluralism implies cross-cultural tolerance in mission. It is iconoclastic against absolutist tendencies in culture and religion. This should protect the cultural particularity of a Jew as a Jew and a Gentile as a Gentile. At Pentecost this pluralism, with all difficulties related to it, has become the cornerstone of universal design.³²

³⁰ See: M. Goulder, *St. Paul versus St. Peter: A Tale of Two Missions* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994).

³¹ Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles I*, 119.

³² Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 27.

Two communication miracles

We now have to strike a balance between Babel and Jerusalem based on what we have developed so far. First of all, we need to recognize that these texts have no formal relationship. The passage of Acts 2 does not associate itself with the story of the tower of Babel. It is only in the history of Christian interpretation that the link between the two passages has been established, quite understandably because both texts are dealing with the multiplicity of languages.

We can agree with the traditional interpretation that the texts are quite different in some respect. In Babel the people were initially united and in the end dispersed over the face of all the earth because of the multiplicity of languages and failing communication. While in Jerusalem people came from the ends of the earth together and the communication was flowing, despite the many languages. Witherington writes succinctly:

If there is any allusion in this story (of Pentecost) to the events transpired at the Tower of Babel, it is perhaps to be found here in v.6, for we are told that the sound of hearing these Galilean Jews speaking in their own native tongues confused them, or in other words we see here Babel reversed. There the unintelligibility factor caused by many tongues caused confusion; here the intelligibility factor does so!³³

Based on this the Church was able to state that the lost unity of Babel was restored in Jerusalem and in the Church. But from here onwards we need to be careful. Indeed, there is a certain measure of unity in the passage of Pentecost. But that is not strictly the achievement of the Spirit, for these people had come together themselves, and were already united ethnically. With Pentecost we are dealing with Jews, not with Gentiles gathering from all the corners of the earth. So we cannot too easily postulate a wonderful unity as a result of Pentecost. On the contrary, they are at Pentecost not united in language, but they remain diverse. Their countries of origin and their languages are maintained and newly ordained. Though there may be a miracle of communication, there is no unification of languages (which would have been the opposite of Babel). Surely, there is a vision of unity envisaged in the passage of Pentecost: all the nations will hear the message. But this vision does not reverse Babel. In the Pentecost passage there is no movement from the ends of the earth towards Jerusalem. The diaspora

³³ Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 136.

Jews were indeed together in Jerusalem, but from there the direction is given towards the ends of the earth. Neither are the languages from the corners of the world now unified. The movement towards the ends of the earth, as well as the diversity of languages is common to both Babel and Jerusalem! However, the difference from Babel is that the nations and languages within this new community will be able to communicate, despite the diversity!

Actually, we are dealing with two “communication miracles”. In both cases the miracle is protecting the people from centralistic domination while preserving their freedom. In Babel the miracle makes sure that, through the diversity of languages, the communication is broken down. In Jerusalem the miracle makes sure that, despite the diversity of languages, the communication is established. But in both cases the miracle makes sure that

- (a) a direction is chosen towards the ends of the earth;
- (b) a diversity in languages and cultures is being favoured and cherished;
- (c) any centralistic and domineering tendencies are abandoned and scattered.

In *this perspective* the passages of Babel and Jerusalem are quite similar. We might even say that Pentecost is a fulfilment of Babel. At Pentecost the Spirit is leading the Jesus-movement across the borders of nation and ethnicity. There is the great vision of universal quality: “In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek” (Gal. 3:28) But in this universal Church the warning of Babel has been incorporated. Towers reaching into the heavens in order to dictate unity are not to be tolerated. The church is not going to be a monolithic structure. The central and dominant centre (Jerusalem) is not to dictate the periphery. On the contrary, all those countries of the periphery are explicitly mentioned in the Pentecost account. At Pentecost, the Jewish language (and culture) is relativized, while the Gentile languages (and cultures) are de-stigmatised! Unity, in the church, is consequently not by force of power. Unity can only be found in diversity. The diversity in languages (and cultures) is a safeguard against cultural domination in this new community. There cannot be an imposed unity, while others cannot be forced into ideological or ecclesiastical conformity. In this new community of the Spirit, all that is peripheral, small and unspectacular will have a central place. The Gospel cannot be imposed on others in the garb of a dominant culture, it needs to be translated! So the two passages have a similar scope. In Babel the people are liberated from political and cultural domination and sent to the ends of the earth to live in linguistic and cultural diversity. In Jerusalem, the Spirit directs the church to the ends of the earth, supporting linguistic and cultural diversity over against any domination.

At this place, I recall the position of Lamin Sanneh as mentioned in the introduction. There we identified two basic paradigms of mission: “mission as diffusion” and “mission as translation”. I hope to have clarified that the passages of Babel and Jerusalem are fundamentally opposed to “mission as diffusion”, as in this paradigm the message is not to be separated from the culture of the carrier. Mission by diffusion implies essentially an imperialist form of mission, discarding the recipient culture. Though Sanneh states that “mission by diffusion” is unquestionably the stronger strand in Islam, we need to add humbly that historically this has been the stronger strand in Christianity as well! But principally and basically this model is abolished in Babel and Jerusalem. As such, I believe that the passages of Babel and Jerusalem give strong support of Sanneh’s thesis that translatability is the vintage mark of Christianity.³⁴

4. **Kumba**

In the former two sections I have given exegetical and missiological reflections on two passages which are quite neglected by Sanneh in his book *Translating the Message*. I have demonstrated how these passages actually support the main thesis of Sannah’s book, namely that translatability is the vintage mark of Christian mission. In the meantime I have tried to establish a new balance between the two passages under discussion. In this final section I will now use this meaning of “mission as translation” (as interpreted in the passages of Genesis 11 and Acts 2) not so much for evaluating the missionary enterprise of the past, but, moreover, to consider the implications of this view of mission for the historical churches in Africa at the beginning of the 3rd millennium, especially for the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (PCC) with its theological seminary in Kumba.

In African Theology today it is often taken for granted that the three C’s of the colonial period (Christianity, Commerce and Civilization) have combined together and destroyed African traditional religions and cultures. Almost all African theologians of the second half of the 20th century have objected to the denigratory attitude of Western missionaries vis à vis traditional religions and cultures. Almost all have defended a certain continuity between the pre-Christian traditions and Christianity. We might even say that this indignation comprises

³⁴ Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 29.

one of the main roots of African Theology.³⁵ Basically, they accuse the missionaries of having done mission according to the method of “mission as diffusion” which made, perhaps often unconsciously, the missionary culture the inseparable carrier of the message. Thus, becoming a Christian in practice implied becoming European. Christianization implied Westernization! The basics of “mission as translation” were not acknowledged. The warning of Babel against cultural and linguistic domination was not heard. The Pentecostal safeguard of linguistic and cultural plurality within Christianity was not recognized.

We are fortunate that Sanneh has objected to this position in African Theology as being too simplistic. According to him there has been much translation in the missionary enterprise. Despite the fact that Christian mission was indeed often a surrogate of Western Colonialism, there has always been a serious undercurrent of translatability. Missionaries, by investing enormously in Bible translations in the vernacular languages, gave great encouragement to indigenous aspirations. According to Sanneh, the overlap between Christian mission and the revitalization of indigenous cultures remains one of the most undervalued themes in the study of Christian expansion.³⁶ In this way Sanneh tries to moderate the thesis that Christian mission was mainly done “as diffusion”.³⁷

However, this discussion about the evaluation of the missionary past remains directed towards the past. According to Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, much of the “old” African Theology proceeded out of the recognition of Africa’s massive victimization and exploitation, while in the new emerging paradigm African theologians will move beyond complaints concerning the past and become agents of the future themselves.³⁸ In this perspective it is far more interesting to consider what the implications of “mission as translation” are for the missionary thinking in the African churches today.

³⁵ See e.g. J. Parratt, “Introduction” in J. Parratt (ed.) *A reader in African Christian Theology*, rev. ed. (London: SPCK, 1997), 1-8 and K. Bediako, “The Roots of African Theology”, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol. 13, No.2 (1989): 58-65.

³⁶ L. Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 185.

³⁷ During my missiology course with the Presbyterian Theological Seminary batch of 2000, the students were exceptionally angry with this moderation made by Sanneh. They were of the opinion that translatability entails much more than language only. They accused Sanneh, who is teaching in the United States of America, of dancing to the masters tune.

³⁸ S. T. Maluleke, “Black and African Theology after Apartheid and after the Cold War: An Emerging Paradigm”, *Exchange* Vol. 29, No. 3 (2000): 197, 201.

Practice of mission by historical churches in Africa

Let us use the three common points which we identified, when we were striking a balance between the passages of Babel and Pentecost, for analysing the practice of mission in historical churches in Africa, especially the PCC. We stated that the basic meaning of both texts could be characterized through these points (a) a direction is chosen towards the ends of the earth; (b) a diversity in languages and cultures is being favoured and cherished; (c) any centralistic and dominating tendencies are abandoned and scattered.

a.

This point is generally taken very serious in African churches as they possess a vigorous missionary elan. In the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (PCC) a continuous growth is being reported, both internally and externally: numerous baptisms and confirmations; new prayer cells and congregations; new missionary areas. Many tribes and clans (and languages) are being reached which are quite distant from motorable roads and the “civilized world”. Pastors regularly track for many hours, even up to days in order to reach their congregations. Equally, many new congregations are being created in the Francophone area of Cameroon, while the PCC traditionally operates in the Anglophone part of Cameroon. In this respect the Church has secured the missionary legacy, and taken over the place which the Western missionaries used to have in the past.

b.

In this process of going towards the ends of the earth, many different languages are met with. The diversity of languages in Cameroon is quite extraordinary, even for African standards. The present dean of the Seminary,³⁹ the Rev. Dr. Jonas Dah, is usually joking that the Tower of Babel stood in Cameroon. There are about 200 languages in Cameroon. In this diversity of languages there is a great need for a common language. Like in other parts of Africa, the colonial languages function as such. Besides English and French as colonial languages, pidgin English is commonly used in the Anglophone region as *lingua franca*.⁴⁰

³⁹ I am writing this article Anno Domini 2001.

⁴⁰ A pidgin is a marginal language which arises to fulfill certain restricted communication needs among people who have no common language. Cameroon pidgin (Kamtok) developed during the encounter between the English language of the British Empire and a multitude of local languages. In Anglophone Cameroon, pidgin English is rapidly becoming a creole

How does the church deal with these languages? In history, the Basel missionaries tried to spread the gospel by using some vernacular languages. They selected in the coastal area one of the main languages, the Duala language, as the church language for the whole southern missionary area. They had already met a complete translation of the Bible in Duala, made by their Baptist predecessor Alfred Saker (1872!).⁴¹ In 1893 a Duala hymn book with 160 hymns was published. For the northern missionary area the Basel missionaries selected the Mungaka language of the village Bali. The Mungaka New Testament was finalized in 1931 (the complete Bible in 1961) and a Mungaka hymn book in 1939. Also in the mission schools these native languages were used for teaching, despite the fact that the colonial governments (first the German and later the British) were not in support of this language policy of the Basel Mission.

Though the vernacular languages have been used since the advent of Christianity, today the situation is quite different. The Duala and Mungaka languages are hardly in use anymore. Of the 69 students presently studying in the seminary hardly any is able to communicate in one of these languages. These languages have ceased to be common church languages and are now only used by certain choirs as their choir-language. Increasing emphasis has been given to the use of English in church. With the introduction of the official Book of Divine Services (in high-brow English) in the 1980s, which all congregations are supposed to use, the liturgical language has become exclusively English.⁴² Almost all of the sermons are, apart from English, conducted in pidgin English, a language very close to many people, but not an indigenous language!

So we now see the PCC spreading throughout Anglophone Cameroon (and beyond) with English and pidgin English as church languages. Indigenous languages are only used when the people cannot be reached otherwise. But as soon as certain areas have become “civilized” the normal church languages come back in use.⁴³ Here we have to pose the painful question whether the present church in Africa (in this case the PCC) has taken “mission as

(being a pidgin that takes the position of a mother tongue in a certain speech community) See L. Todd, *Pidgins and Creoles 2nd ed.* (London: Routledge, 1990).

⁴¹ At the Conference of Berlin (1884) when the European nations divided Africa, Cameroon was assigned to Germany. Two years later the Basel missionaries entered Kamerun.

⁴² PCC, *Book of Divine Services: Volume I-VI* (1984).

⁴³ Quotation from a pastor who returned for further studies to the seminary.

translation” seriously and whether the Pentecostal linguistic and cultural plurality is being favoured and cherished?

c.

In both passages of the Tower of Babel and of the Pentecost-event a strong witness against cultural domination is heard. The implications of “mission as translation” are fundamentally pluralistic. This constitutes one of the most serious challenges to African churches. In Africa, unity is traditionally highly cherished and diversity (or better dis-unity) met with great suspicion. The PCC has been stressing the importance of unity and loyalty quite seriously. This must be seen against the background of a great plurality of cultures and languages, which might lead to divisions in the church. This fear is not illusory, for there has always been the tension between the Duala-church in the South and the Mungaka-church in the North. Up till today this tension between north-west and south-west in the PCC is quite poignant. Perhaps against this background we must understand the great emphasis on uniformity in liturgy and organization. The church is managed according to a strictly hierarchical and centralistic model. Pastors are being posted and all finances are directed towards the central church. Local congregations are part of the PCC system and have no independent existence. Presbyterian Christians and presbyterian worship must be identical in any corner of the church. As noted above, the liturgy is conducted in English, while the sermons are preached in pidgin English. Vernacular diversity is becoming uncommon. When considering culture in a broader sense, beyond mere language, we may observe that the PCC, like so many other historical churches in Africa, is hesitant towards African culture. Compared to indigenous African churches,⁴⁴ an ambivalent attitude exists towards the African ‘spiritual’ world-view; to charismatic renewal and prophecy, and to healing through prayer.

Taken this all together we get the picture of a fairly Westernized church, which is spreading its wings all over Anglophone and even Francophone Cameroon. The strict hierarchical and centralistic model of organization ensures that there is a strong common “language” and identity, resulting in a common “PCC-culture”. This model of “church-civilization” spreads from the dominant centres (cities like Buea, Limbe, Kumba, Bamenda, Douala and Yaoundé) to the periphery of every bush corner. The critique raised by African

⁴⁴ For the changing terminology concerning African Independent Churches see J.S. Pobee and Gabriel Ositelu II, *African Initiatives in Christianity: The growth, gifts and diversities of indigenous African churches. A challenge to the ecumenical movement* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998).

theologians against the Western missionary enterprise is now boomeranging back to the African churches themselves. Are their own missionary strategies different from the past? Is the warning of Babel taken into account? Do they have enough openness to cultural and linguistic diversity within the church? Are they doing mission basically by diffusion? Will they, themselves, later not be accused of participation in an ongoing cultural annihilation as part of the global process of cultural imperialism? Will historians of later centuries not place the African churches in the same category as the former missions, namely being part of a cultural system which spreads from the centre to the periphery? In this case not from the Western centre to the African periphery but now from the African centres to the African periphery.

5. Conclusion

In this article I have given missiological reflections on Genesis 11: 1-9 and Acts 2:1-13, in which I have shown that these passages well support Sanneh's thesis of translatability. I have also tried to establish a new relationship between these two passages beyond the traditional interpretation of antagonism. Finally, I have used these ideas for reflections on the ecclesiastical and missionary situation in historical churches in Africa. My goal has been to raise consciousness as to whether these churches are able to stand the critique which has been raised by African theologians against the Western missionary enterprise, namely that this enterprise was imprisoned in the Western "civilizational" expansion and, as such, has been detrimental to indigenous cultures.

Based on the missiological reflections of this article, we may conclude that Christian mission should fundamentally allow and encourage Christians to be Christians in their own cultural and linguistic context. Any model of Christian mission which plants and imposes ecclesiastical systems, and converts Christians "in their own image" must be rejected. Any model which prefers an overtowering unity and ideological conformity (Babel) over radical pluralism, and which does not consider the recipient culture (Pentecost/Jerusalem) as the true and only locus of the message, must be met with ardent suspicion. Any model which does not gladly accept (the complications of) cultural particularities and which does not want to leave the dominant centre for the "insignificance and disgrace" of the periphery of the earth (the ends of the earth) is not legitimate.

Not in Babel, not in Jerusalem and ... not in Kumba!